

China's False Promise

Gunboat Diplomacy, Not Win-Win Outcomes, Will Shape the South China Sea

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Abstract

For a decade, China has waged “gunboat diplomacy” in the South China Sea (SCS) by bullying its maritime neighbors into accepting its territorial claims of “indisputable sovereignty” and control over 90 percent of the sea. The costs of China’s maritime coercion, however, have mounted. Beijing’s hostile actions have scuttled its regional partnerships, while bolstering America’s relations with Southeast Asian nations. Sensing this rising enmity, Chinese leaders have recently touted “cooperation” and “openness” to reach an amenable solution in the SCS. In practice, they invoke restrictions and incite armed confrontations. Based on Chinese sources, primary reporting, and historic analysis, this article argues that China’s newfound “neighborly approach” will warrant a transient tactical shift, but Beijing’s revanchist strategy will remain unchanged. The US military and its allies must exploit Beijing’s professed cessa-

tion of aggression by mounting a maritime countercoercion effort that deters continued Chinese maritime belligerency through denial and punishment before the SCS becomes an undeniable “Chinese lake.”

When recounting the Siege of Melos, Greek historian Thucydides wrote, “[T]he strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.” The snappy epigram, written more than 2,000 years ago, epitomizes the simmering tensions and disputes in today’s South China Sea (SCS). For more than a decade, Beijing has badgered, browbeat, and bullied its maritime neighbors—Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia—into accepting China’s dubious claims of “indisputable sovereignty” over countless disputed features and, in turn, its jurisdiction over nine-tenths of the SCS.¹

Beijing’s pressure campaign to assert a “zone of super-ordinate influence” in the SCS has come at a considerable cost.² Confrontational ploys have dismayed the international community and those four maritime neighbors, who lay competing claims to parts of the sea and incur the brunt of China’s wrath because of it. Hostile gambits designed to resolve territorial disputes through sheer force have undermined years of Chinese public diplomacy. In the face of such resentment, Beijing has feigned amnesia. On 17 January 2022, at a virtual forum hosted by China’s embassy in Manila, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said Beijing would never wield its economic or military strength to “bully” other nations, particularly in the SCS. “Stressing only one side’s claims and imposing one’s own will on the other is not a proper way for neighbors to treat each other,” Wang said. “[I]t goes against the oriental philosophy of how people should get along with each other.”³ Wang’s implicit embrace of China’s symbolic panda over its dragon contradicts recent history. But his remarks were not a slip of the tongue.

As early as January 2021, Chinese leader Xi Jinping told the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, that China sought

1. [O]penness and inclusiveness instead of closeness and exclusion . . .
2. [I]nternational law and international rules instead of seeking one’s own supremacy . . .
3. [C]onsultation and cooperation instead of conflict and confrontation.⁴

All three of these stated preferences sidestep a decade of destabilizing Chinese behavior in the SCS. As this article explains, China excludes countries from op-

erating within certain regions, asserts supremacy by force, dismisses international law tribunal rulings, and rarely cooperates with rival claimants.

Despite the variance, Xi continues to tout his nation's multilateralism. Ten months after the 2021 WEF, he told an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, "China was, is, and will always be a good neighbor, good friend, and good partner." He promised that China "absolutely will not seek hegemony or . . . bully the small."⁵ And at this year's WEF, Xi implored the world to embrace "peaceful coexistence" and discard "hegemony and bullying"—two concepts Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials invoke to denigrate American foreign policy.⁶ Over the past year, top Chinese officials have lamented *foreign powers* (read: the United States) that have "stepped up [their] manipulation and involvement" in SCS disputes and prevented "sustainable development."⁷ It takes a special kind of memory loss, acrobatic diplomacy, or mental bifurcation to peddle this narrative. Yet it represents Beijing's new favorite geopolitical dictum. In this narrative, benevolent China fosters goodwill and peace through "win-win outcomes" with its Asian neighbors, and malevolent Washington wants a "cold war" to sustain its unwarranted and unwanted hegemony of the Indo-Pacific region. This CCP line is a bit rich.

The manifestation of Xi's "China Dream," in which China rejuvenates itself by reclaiming its position at "the center of the world stage" after its "century of humiliation," envisions a radically different international order predicated on Beijing wielding all instruments of power as either carrots or sticks to respectively compel or coerce its neighbors into accepting its illiberal rule.⁸ Although Xi and Wang preach neighborly relations, in practice, Beijing seeks regional hegemony, bullies smaller nations, and holds a very one-sided view of *win-win*. Exhibit A: the SCS. In this critical waterway, China has waged a "war without gun smoke."⁹ It threatens and attacks its neighbors into capitulating to China's expansive and illegal claims of territorial and maritime sovereignty. Once Chinese vessels assert and enforce *undisputed* control over internationally *disputed* features through standoffs and patrols, China then dredges these features into artificial and militarized islands, replete with runways for long-distance bombers, hardened bunkers, and missile batteries.¹⁰ These outposts enable China to project its military power deeper into the Western Pacific.

A key impetus behind China's maritime revanchism is its obsession with erecting a security buffer zone around the mainland that prevents the United States and US allies from using the SCS as a staging ground to encircle or "strangle" China.¹¹ That is a tall order. It requires China to secure "near seas" control while challenging, deterring, and destroying American regional influence, willpower, and power projection within the First Island Chain. But before all that, and long

before China can topple America's East Asian security architecture, Beijing must assert control over the SCS by presenting China's neighbors with a lose-lose dilemma. China's neighbors must either forfeit their SCS sovereignty claims or suffer China's wrath until they surrender these claims. So much for win-win outcomes.

As this article explores, these bullied neighbors recently discovered that "what they must do" is by no means definitive. Their lose-lose dilemma is not an inescapable quandary. In the past two years, smaller Asian claimants have chipped away at China's stacked ultimatum. They have sought international assistance to resist Chinese aggression, refused to cooperate with Beijing on nonmilitary matters and publicized Chinese aggression at sea for the world to see. Beijing perceives the growing enmity, which explains Xi and Wang's denial of state-orchestrated maritime coercion and promise of goodwill. So, Beijing is now giving peace a chance.

This article argues that China's new penchant for neighborly relations is a calculated strategic shift from bullying to diplomacy to temper the international backlash triggered by the former. But a volte-face from schoolyard bully to backyard pal should not be taken at face value. A more conciliatory demeanor will not forever dash Beijing's ploy to present its neighbors with a lose-lose dilemma and coerce them into accepting Chinese control. The aim remains the same while the tactics slightly differ. Instead of deploying overwhelming force to intimidate a rival claimant into surrendering its sovereignty of a disputed feature, China will wear them out—peaceably. This *neighborly* approach would bear fruit when Southeast Asian nations cede their claimed features to China not out of fear but exhaustion. They may tire of resisting China and decide "if you can't beat them, join them." Such submission would legitimize a decade of "resolving" maritime disputes through bullying and intimidation vice international law and negotiation. Under that precedent, might makes right.

This article concludes that further inaction and strategic drift from Washington and its Southeast Asian partners will set a dangerous course for the SCS. Beijing's professed cessation of aggression, however, offers aggrieved parties an opportunity to uphold the rule of law and the status quo in the SCS. A US-led, multilateral, maritime countercoercion strategy centered on developing a joint, integrated deterrence of Chinese aggression through exposure, denial, and punishment could halt future Chinese gains, avert conflict, and preserve the rules-based order.

The Stakes in the South China Sea

The SCS is home to an array of international disputes. China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia (and to a lesser extent Taiwan and Brunei)

claim and contest sovereignty over the sea's rocks, reefs, shoals, and small islands. Sovereignty matters most, determining and delineating certain maritime zones, per the 1982 United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Valuable rights and privileges accompany those zones. Once a country claims and asserts sovereignty over a feature, a "territorial sea" is established 12 nautical miles from the feature's shoreline. Within this zone, the state exercises full sovereignty and exploits the resources of the sea, seabed, and subsoil. The state cannot legally restrict the innocent passage of a foreign vessel, including warships, but if a vessel's passage is "prejudicial to the peace, good order or security" of the state, the claimant may thwart such passage. Most of these rights and privileges also apply 200 nautical miles out from a claimed feature (and a country's mainland), which comprises a state's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). This zone grants the state the exclusive right to explore and exploit natural resources and arrest foreign entities that illegally infringe on those resources.¹²

EEZs may transcend economic exploitation, depending on which country one asks. The United States and China disagree over whether a state can regulate foreign military operations within its EEZ. Beijing argues that an EEZ grants the right to regulate economic activities (e.g., who can drill for oil or fish) *and* military activities (e.g., who can conduct a security exercise). Washington and its Pacific allies disagree.¹³ An *exclusive economic zone* bestows the right to regulate economic activities, they argue, hence its nomenclature, nothing more.

Despite decades of skirmishes over disputed features within the SCS's contested Paracel and Spratly Islands, the sea became a hotbed of conflict in 2009. In early May of that year, China submitted a map to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf based on its controversial nine-dash-line, which charts the maximum extent and scope of *all* "historical" Chinese claims within the SCS. The dashes do not imply "ownership of the whole South China Sea," according to Chinese scholars and officials, but rather "ownership of the islands and their offshore waters."¹⁴ The two are the same. All features China "historically" claims, legally entitles China to the rights, benefits, sovereignty, and control of a "territorial sea" and "EEZ" emanating from each feature, per UNCLOS. By amalgamating all the features and offshore waters China claims, the nine-dash-line implicitly stipulates Chinese control over 90 percent of the SCS. If China's nine-dash-line map was accredited, then Beijing's sovereignty over almost all SCS features would make the SCS a big Chinese lake.

China's claim of more than nine-tenths of the SCS contravenes the established mainland EEZs of six Southeast Asian countries—and the additional features (and subsequent EEZs) they also claim. Within days of the map's release, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia lodged diplomatic protests. Bei-

jing refused to budge, reiterating its “indisputable sovereignty over the islands of the South China Sea and adjacent waters” and “sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof.”¹⁵ Seven years later, in 2016, an international tribunal under UNCLOS impugned China’s “historic rights.” The Hague found “no legal basis” for China’s expansive claims and authority, thereby invalidating the rights to resources and oversight each claimed feature provided. Although China is a UNCLOS signatory, which makes the tribunal’s verdict binding, China’s Foreign Ministry dismissed the ruling, calling it “null and void.”¹⁶

With lawfare and attempts at *de jure* control rebuffed in international courts, China has employed pugnacious forms of military coercion since the 2016 ruling to secure *de facto* control of the SCS for two reasons. First, Beijing believes the international community will avoid protesting or countermanding China’s maritime militancy if other claimants swiftly submit to Chinese control. From Beijing’s viewpoint, why would other nations defend a claimant who never put up a fight? Second, power begets power. If China’s maritime adversaries cede their claims of disputed features, China can seize those claims, build on those gains, militarize more islands, exploit more resources, and thereby dominate the SCS. This could further Chinese aims to turn the entire First Island Chain into a *weapons engagement zone* (WEZ) to keep the United States out. This would allow China to erect an unparalleled and unchallenged regional order that greenlights and expedites China’s national rejuvenation. Such a grand plan will not happen overnight or even a fortnight. Think a decade or two. Much like the weathering of a rock—egregiously slow in and imperceptible to the naked eye—China wants to control the entire SCS discreetly, gradually. And by the time any country fully notices, it will be too late.

China’s “Gray Zone” Gunboat Diplomacy

The use of sea power to coerce and compel other states into accepting a new regional maritime order is nothing new. China’s maritime behavior has a whiff of old-school *gunboat diplomacy* to it. But instead of a nineteenth-century British gunboat sailing close to the shores of a tiny troublemaker to scare them into establishing a colonial outpost, the Chinese deploy a diverse assemblage of vessels to “wrap,” surround, and squeeze a disputed feature or adversary vessel until the area becomes surrounded with “so many boats,” one senior Chinese naval official explained, it resembles a “cabbage.”¹⁷

The *wrapping* operational concept’s suffocating nature should spark conflict. But China dispatches its cabbage armada with few reprisals from rivals because its front lines consist of seafaring vessels “not associated” with the military. They

are considered gray-zone forces, for they operate in the competitive space between war and peace by advancing China's geostrategic objectives without serving in the military or wearing a uniform. Two gray-zone or paranaul organizations drive China's gunboat diplomacy.

First, the blue-hulled People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM)—an innocuous fleet of fishing vessels “uniquely” equipped with automatic weapons and reinforced hulls—normalize and manifest China's claims by arriving at a disputed feature *en masse*. If rival claimants' vessels cannot mount a response to the PAFMM's overwhelming presence, then they accept Chinese control. But PAFMM vessels are more than just a troupe of sovereignty seekers. They double as provocateurs. These “fishing boats” instigate and force interstate showdowns and standoffs over disputed features by fishing in another claimant's EEZ to elicit a reaction. Or they swarm, ram, and sink foreign vessels in disputed waters and the high seas, discouraging those vessels from operating in the same waters again. What makes the PAFMM particularly potent is its deniability. Vessels are either crewed by retired military personnel or commercial fishermen recruited via subsidy programs.¹⁸ Much like Russia's “little green men” in Crimea, PAFMM's “little blue men” are distinct from the rank-and-file of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).¹⁹ The employment of the former as a state-controlled instrument of force is shrouded with fishing equipment. Professed deniability and perceived innocence on paper confer leeway and maneuverability at sea. PAFMM forces unassumingly transit deeper into a rival claimant's waters or attack a rival's vessel with little retribution, all under the illusion that they are anglers acting in self-defense. But do not be fooled. As a cascade of government and think tank reports have substantiated in recent months, the PAFMM does not fish, it fights—all at the behest, funding, and direction of the Chinese government.²⁰

One cabbage layer out, the white-hulled Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) patrols and enforces the maritime claims the PAFMM establishes. Less militaristic than warships, this gray-zone force lowers the propensity for a fight to break out during a standoff while simultaneously threatening, accosting, and punishing vessels that operate near Chinese-claimed features. Though not classified as warships, CCG vessels are still imposing. Their patrol boats and cutters, like the *Zhaoyu*-class large patrol ship (WPS), stretch 360 feet from bow to stern, displace 3,500 tons, and pack a 30-mm gun.²¹ In late 2021, the PLAN began to transfer the service's original 22 *Jiangdao*-class to the CCG. Although the corvettes will reportedly lose their YJ-83 antiship missile and surface-to-air missile, these gray-cum-white-hulled vessels will retain PLAN radars, electronic jammers, and guns.²² If a standoff over a disputed feature arises between PAFMM boats and foreign vessels, a CCG vessel typically loiters at a distance or *peaceably* escorts

foreign vessels through “Chinese waters.” Through this benign posture, CCG units can still flex their impressive capabilities as a deterrent against escalation. Under the guise of fisheries and maritime law enforcement (MLE), CCG vessels also patrol Chinese-claimed features—further legitimizing China’s claims while dissuading foreign designs to reclaim sovereignty. These patrols also serve as a pretext for Chinese administration of a disputed feature, which masks a dispute’s military dimension. The Philippines or Vietnam are hard-pressed to forcibly assert their claims over Woody Island, for instance, because the Chinese built an administrative district on the island, which is now home to roads, banks, an airstrip, and 1,000 people.²³ If rival claimants are brazen enough to challenge these *settled* disputes, China would argue that its civilians—not just its soldiers—are endangered. In that case, CCG patrollers would morph into *self-defenders*.

Beijing leaves the heavy lifting of its SCS gunboat diplomacy to these gray-zone forces. Together, the PAFMM and CCG demonstrate, manifest, and enforce China’s maritime claims. And if help is needed, lingering in the margins of the disputed area is the PLAN, the third and outermost layer of the cabbage armada. These supposedly aloof warships signal to adversarial foreign vessels or countries the lethal consequences they face if they choose to engage.

Methods of Maritime Coercion

China’s maritime coercion campaign spans the conflict continuum, avoiding a one-size-fits-all response. The aims and tools appear similar, but the methods and means of opportunity vary—dependent on the opposing claimant or disputed feature. Besides standard sovereignty seeking, patrols, and enforcement, notable Chinese gunboat diplomacy practices include the following:

Blockades

For decades, the Philippines claimed and administered the Scarborough Shoal—a disputed feature 120 nautical miles west of Luzon inside the Philippine mainland’s EEZ—until 10 April 2012. On that day, a Philippine Navy vessel, BRP *Gregorio del Pilar*, arrived near the shoal to detain a group of Chinese boats for illegal fishing. After the Filipino sailors returned to their ship following a search of the boats—but not before they re-embarked to make arrests—the Chinese fisherman radioed authorities in Hainan Province for help. Two CCG cutters on patrol nearby responded to the scene and positioned themselves between the *Gregorio del Pilar* and the shoal’s lagoon, blocking the Philippine arrest of the fishermen. A standoff ensued.

For the next month, Manila sought a “diplomatic solution” and tried de-escalating the conflict by replacing the *Gregorio del Pilar* with a less militaristic coast guard ship and fisheries vessel. Beijing did not return the gesture. At the height of the conflict, in early June, a total of eight Chinese cutters and a dozen fishing boats surrounded and stared down the two demilitarized Philippine ships. Ironically, Chinese diplomats accused the Philippines of “bullying” and levied an informal economic embargo on Philippine bananas to compel Manila into surrendering the shoal. Recognizing the futility of a prolonged disproportionate standoff, the Philippines withdrew its remaining vessels on 15 June based on an alleged “agreement” with Beijing. The deal’s details were sketchy. Either Manila fabricated the deal to justify its withdrawal or China refused to honor it because when the Philippine ships left, the Chinese stayed—and have since. Throughout the standoff, China never used force. It instead dispatched an imposing gray-zone force that surrounded, outnumbered, and pressured Manila into ceding de facto control of the shoal while normalizing Chinese claims and incursions within the Philippine EEZ.²⁴

Harassing Foreign Exploration and Invading EEZs

An estimated 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and at least 11 billion barrels of provable oil reserves make the SCS a hydrocarbon haven.²⁵ The contest to drill and develop these resources undergirds most SCS sovereignty disputes. China wants these resources. So does every other claimant. To advance the Chinese cause, PAFMM vessels persistently track, trail, and harass gas and oil platforms and survey vessels from Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines operating within their respective EEZs. China also dispatches its survey vessels to conduct hydrocarbon exploration while escorted by CCG escorts. Beijing harasses foreign vessels and abrogates foreign EEZs to gauge how much energy another claimant will expend to defend its EEZ. After testing these limits, China adjusts its approach in the hopes that the claimant grows weary of contesting China’s EEZ incursions or exploration harassment and permits China to operate within its EEZ unobstructed. Once again, China’s lose-lose mind-set persists. A country must either fight China to preserve its sovereignty or cede its sovereignty and natural resources to China. One notable example occurred in December 2019, when CCG and PAFMM vessels harassed foreign ships resupplying *West Capella*, an oil exploration vessel operated by Petronas (the Malaysian state oil company) off Malaysia’s coast. A month later, China’s *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, a state-owned research vessel, entered Malaysia’s EEZ and began operating near the *West Capella*. Two CCG vessels escorted and protected the Chinese research vessel during its EEZ intrusion operations. Malaysia wanted to peacefully end the standoff. China denied the

standoff's existence, justifying the *Haiyang Dizhi 8's* presence in Malaysia's EEZ as routine and legal.²⁶

Evicting Foreign Vessels

Whereas the Chinese merely harass Malaysian exploration vessels, for instance, in clearly delineated Malaysian coastal waters, Beijing pulls no punches near features China *indisputably* claims and controls. Particularly near the Paracel and Spratly Islands, Chinese ships *expel* foreign fishermen with threatening bridge-to-bridge communications, sirens, and floodlights. If verbal intimidation fails, force follows. Methods include water-cannoning, ramming, swarming, threatening a collision, or damaging navigation and communications gear.²⁷

In June 2020, a CCG ship smashed and sunk a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands. The Chinese vessel repatriated the eight fishermen to another Vietnamese fishing boat but offered no apology when Hanoi lodged an official protest.²⁸ That incident's severity pales in comparison to what happened the year before. In June 2019, a probable PAFMM vessel attacked and sank a Philippine fishing boat near Reed Bank, 300 nautical miles southwest of Manila. (The 2016 UNCLOS tribunal deemed the feature a part of the Philippine EEZ, despite China's counterclaim.) The PAFMM vessel left the 22 Philippine fishermen to sink with their ship until they were rescued by nearby Vietnamese fishermen. Chinese diplomats were unperturbed—even borderline insolent—following the international outcry. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson called the incident an “ordinary maritime traffic accident.”²⁹

So far, foreign fishing vessels have taken the brunt of China's abuse but that does not prevent China from evicting other foreign commercial vessels—or even warships—in the future.

Coercion Does Not Pay

These vignettes may understate the scope and intensity of China's gunboat diplomacy. Since 2016, the Philippine government has filed 211 diplomatic protests against China over the SCS, 153 of which were in 2021 alone.³⁰ Even worse, China's maritime coercion has shown few signs of retreat.

In March 2021, 200 Chinese fishing boats—mostly PAFMM forces—swarmed Whitsun Reef within the Philippine EEZ. China denied that the massed fleet “belong[ed]” to the maritime militia. The vessels were allegedly seeking shelter from bad weather.³¹ In reality, as then-Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana explained, the swarming revealed China's “intent to further occupy features” in the SCS.³² After a months-long standoff, repeated protests from Manila,

and deterrence patrols by Philippine and American warships, the PAFMM vessels departed. At Whitsun Reef, China tested the Philippines' resolve to see if it remained as weak as it was during the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff. When Manila refused to back down, the boats left—according to Beijing—because the weather improved. On paper, neither side lost.

Victory's absence at Whitsun Reef did not preclude China from attacking two Filipino boats near the Spratly Islands' Second Thomas Shoal (2TS) in late 2021. Six days before Xi promised ASEAN that China would always be “a good neighbor” and never “bully the small,” CCG vessels water cannoned two Filipino boats resupplying the partly submerged BRP *Sierra Madre*. (The Philippines ran the half-sunken World War II-era landing tank ship (LST) aground on 2TS in 1999 as a Marine detachment outpost to defend the country's claim.) The attack lasted an hour, forcing the damaged Filipino supply ships to forego their mission and return to port. Manila and Washington protested the incident.³³ A week later, BRP *Sierra Madre* was resupplied while Chinese vessels watched from afar.³⁴ Since then, resupply missions have proceeded similarly with Beijing's most provocative gambit being a CCG escort of resupply vessels.

These umpteen coercive actions make Xi and Wang's declarations of *good neighborly* relations jarring. Beijing is hypocritical. It lectures its Asian partners about friendliness and diplomacy while bullying and attacking them—sometimes in the same week. Xi says China wants win-win outcomes. But in his seminal text, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey says a “win/win” mind-set “constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions . . . all partners feel good about the decision and feel committed to the action plan . . . [and] one's . . . success is not achieved at the expense or exclusion of the success of others.”³⁵ China lacks that mind-set. It dominates the SCS through a steady, forceful assertion of control that includes flouting international tribunal rulings, harassing Malaysian drilling rigs, leaving Vietnamese fishermen to drown, and obstructing a resupply mission to Philippine Marines. Each incident listed in this article—and the many others omitted for lack of space—costs Southeast Asian nations dearly. For the past decade, *only* China has won in the SCS. And only a win-lose dynamic prevails.

So why are Xi and Wang now advocating *peaceful coexistence*? Top Chinese leaders probably recognize that their coercive maritime campaign to build a “wall of sand” in the SCS to protect against supposed American encirclement has hit a wall of resistance.³⁶ China's gains in the SCS have harmed and infuriated its neighbors. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute's 2021 “The State of Southeast Asia Survey,” which acts as a “barometer of the general attitudes and perceptions” from regional officials in academia, government, and business, reported that less than

20 percent of respondents were confident China would “do the right thing.” Less than two percent believed China was a “benign” or “benevolent” power.³⁷ Moreover, 62 percent of respondents considered China’s “militarization and assertive actions” in the SCS a top concern. Instead of acceding to China’s aspirational maritime order, most claimants have begun strengthening security relationships with each other and the United States.³⁸ For example, after the Whitsun Reef standoff in 2021, then–Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s five-year flirtation with Xi and China proved half-baked. His top lieutenants, including the foreign and defense secretaries, decided to restore and preserve the US–Philippine alliance by extending the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and improving bilateral security commitments. New Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., followed suit by invoking the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal ruling to dismiss China’s expansive SCS claims, while his ambassador to the United States pledged that Manila would “deter aggression,” if diplomacy failed.³⁹

China’s leaders recognize that the nation’s gunboat diplomacy campaign has backfired. In May 2021, Xi advised a Politburo study session that China should strive “to make friends, unite and win over the majority, and constantly expand the circle of friends [to improve] international public opinion.”⁴⁰ Two months later, Wu Shicun, president of China’s National Institute for South China Sea Studies, admitted that the “situation” in the SCS has evolved from “stable and good” (趋稳向好) to “turbulent” (动荡不安), particularly as Washington “deploy[s] superior forces” (署优势兵力) and leads a regional “multilateral security” effort (美国主导的南海安全多边主义) to counter Chinese activities.⁴¹

Therefore, through 2023, expect China to keep preaching—and probably practicing—this veneer of diplomacy, *goodwill*, and *win-win* outcomes, especially after recent soft-power initiatives, including a global distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. But this new diplomatic front does not mean China will forego its revisionist maritime campaign; the campaign will just manifest itself in different ways. Even if Beijing applies less force against its maritime neighbors, it will likely pursue a tempered form of gunboat diplomacy that includes:

- Deploying fewer CCG vessels and more PAFMM boats (not publicly associated with identified militia units). These gray-zone forces could disrupt supply lines to a rival claimant’s military outposts near a disputed feature by harassing supply ships or blockading the feature. In each instance, China could permit supplies if the outpost was vacated immediately, thus giving China control. Additionally, PAFMM boats could continue swarming disputed features (e.g., Whitsun Reef) or invading foreign EEZs to whittle away a claimant’s determination or resources to counter Chinese incursions.

- Sending Chinese survey vessels to operate in another country's EEZ without a direct escort. CCG or PLAN vessels could instead monitor events from over the horizon.
- Lobbying ASEAN partners to sign an SCS Code of Conduct that legitimizes China's nine-dash-line map and normalizes its aggressive behavior, including routine patrols and harassment of foreign vessels (commercial and military) near disputed features. Having solved SCS disputes among the "family of Asian nations," Beijing could denigrate further American interference, reiterating its belief that SCS disputes are an Asian affair.
- Offering economic inducements to beguile another SCS claimant into cooperating with China on a joint-development project in the claimant's EEZ. This tactic undermines the sanctity of an EEZ while guaranteeing Chinese exploitation of another country's resources.

In each example, China lowers its aggression—and the possibility of conflict. This less aggressive posture could lull claimants into a false sense of security. They could willingly cede their SCS claims and sovereignty under the expectation that China has turned a new leaf and will treat them as equals—allowing them to fish or drill for oil freely throughout the SCS. Unfortunately, China's actions over the past decade challenge such naïveté.

A Maritime Countercoercion Strategy

Although the United States *pivoted* to Asia in 2012 and designated China a *great-power competitor* in 2018, Washington has traditionally stayed out of SCS disputes. US leaders typically invoke international law, protest Chinese aggression, hold multilateral security exercises, and execute freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) near disputed features. So far, this strategy of protest and presence has not deterred China's march toward "near seas" control.

In the SCS, American FONOPs are a well-tested instrument of lawfare. The transit of an *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer through the Paracel Islands, for example, signals to China, rival claimants, and other interested parties that innocent passage and freedom of navigation remain valid in the SCS, despite Chinese claims. But these FONOPs also serve a legal purpose: to countermand China's excessive sovereignty and UNCLOS interpretation. Still, such measures neither deter Chinese coercion, demonstrate an American commitment to resolving maritime disputes peacefully, nor reassure America's regional partners that if a conflict broke out, Washington would support them.

SCS claimants and the United States should, instead, test and exploit Beijing's new *neighborly* embrace by waging a multinational maritime countercoercion campaign. Doing so warrants a change in strategy—from Washington, Manila, Jakarta, Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur, and any other Asian capital interested in precluding China's flagrant flouting of international law.

First, this countercoercion campaign must actively challenge China's control of the SCS and deny future gains. The United States should first highlight the gravity of the dispute by internationalizing it. Washington should encourage European allies to transit through the SCS and exercise freedom of navigation, indirectly challenging China's claims and UNCLOS interpretations. Defending the law of the seas matters to the world, not just in Asia. But Washington must walk the walk. On 15 July 2020, then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo promised to "support countries all across the world who recognize that China has violated their legal territorial . . . or maritime claims."⁴² Washington should still honor this pledge by doing the following:

- Dispatch a US Navy support ship, Coast Guard cutter, or US maritime patrol aircraft when a partner nation resupplies their SCS island outposts (e.g., Second Thomas Shoal), conducts presence operations near claimed features, or evicts Chinese fishing vessels illegally operating in their EEZ. US presence would serve as a deterrent or witness to maritime coercion.
- Volunteer to resupply a partner's military outposts and replenish their vessels at sea to support their countercoercion/counterclaim mission.
- Pledge to escort a partner's exploration vessels in their own EEZ, particularly when Chinese research vessels are meddlesome. Precedence already exists. In May 2020, the USS *Gabrielle Giffords* operated near Malaysia's *West Capella* drillship to deter further Chinese harassment.⁴³
- Work with European partners and the Japanese to sell coast guard vessels to Southeast Asian countries for MLE missions inside their EEZ. Swapping out warships for coast guard vessels would also lessen the likelihood that a standoff spirals into conflict.
- Encourage Vietnamese fishermen to continue operating in the same waters the Chinese once evicted them from. PAFMM and CCG vessels cannot bully or evict vessels everywhere all the time, especially if Beijing pledges *neighborly* relations.
- Hold multilateral security exercises that simulate, train, and prepare for sovereignty standoffs or disputes with China—based on PAFMM and CCG

tactics and the cabbage operational concept. To quote a popular American military adage: train like you fight.

- Lastly, maintain a unity of effort at ASEAN meetings when discussing an SCS Code of Conduct. UNCLOS and the law of the seas must remain the arbiter of maritime disputes. SCS claimants should also ameliorate sovereignty disputes among themselves before China exploits these divisions.

Secondly, the United States and SCS claimants must hold China's leadership accountable for their pledge to cooperate in the SCS. If Xi breaks his *neighborly* promise, every instance of bullying from Chinese vessels should be recorded and rebuked—and Beijing should be punished for it. If bellicose fishing vessels deny ties to the Chinese military or government, then Beijing must disown these combative vessels as rogue actors and ensure they stand trial at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. But if Xi's recent pledge does spur a state-mandated reduction in Chinese maritime coercion, Southeast Asian claimants should take advantage of this lull to harden, buttress, reinforce, test, and reassert their long-held, historic SCS claims while erecting a multilateral security regime to raise the costs and stack the odds if Beijing returns to its more openly malicious and revisionist ways. Either way, Beijing must no longer believe the SCS is China's for the taking.

The countercoercion strategy outlined in this article cannot be a wholesale rollback of China's gains in the SCS. Instead, it must compel China to end its maritime coercion. In its expurgation, the countercoercion strategy should foster the firm establishment and unanimous acceptance of a regional order that upholds the law of the sea, settles disputes through jabs across a negotiating table but not shots across the bow, and precludes the strong from doing what they can while the weak suffer what they must. As Thucydides and the history of the SCS suggest, that is a dilemma worth avoiding.

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